

Elucidating the Coherence of Islamic Eschatology

Ash Shaikh Mir Asedullah Quadri

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Abstract

This article delves into Islamic eschatology, drawing a comparative analysis with Judeo-Christian end-time narratives. It explores the distinctive Islamic concepts of the afterlife, the Day of Judgment, and the eternal realms of heaven (Jannah) and hell (Jahannam), underlining the unique features that set Islamic eschatology apart. Central to this discussion is the portrayal of the signs of the Day of Judgment and the descriptions of the afterlife, which are deeply embedded in the daily spiritual life and worldview of Muslims. The article further contrasts Islamic eschatology with Christian and Judaic doctrines, highlighting its theological coherence, its emphasis on moral accountability, and the practical implications for believers. Through a comprehensive analysis, the article aims to illuminate the sensibility and consistency of Islamic eschatology, affirming its position as a coherent and pragmatic approach to understanding the fate of humanity.

Keywords – Islamic Eschatology, Day of Judgment, Afterlife, Comparative Theology, Moral Accountability

Introduction

Eschatology, the study of the last things or ultimate events, is a theme that permeates many theological traditions, each offering its unique vision of the culmination of human history and the destiny of the soul. Islamic eschatology presents a narrative that is both distinct and deeply insightful, offering perspectives that diverge in meaningful ways from the Judeo-Christian narrative.

This article seeks to provide clarity on its distinct principles and their implications for the understanding of life, death, and the hereafter. Central to Islamic theology are the concepts of an afterlife, the Day of Judgment, heaven (Jannah), and hell (Jahannam). These elements are not merely esoteric or speculative; they are deeply integrated into the daily lives and spiritual consciousness of Muslims worldwide.

Unlike Judeo-Christian traditions, which also delve into eschatological themes, Islamic eschatology is characterized by detailed and vivid descriptions of the afterlife, a profound emphasis on the moral and spiritual preparation for the Day of Judgment, and a unique set of signs that herald the end of times.

Foundational Beliefs in Islamic Eschatology

Islamic eschatology, or *'Ilm al-Akhirah*, is a cornerstone of Islamic faith, intricately woven into the teachings of the Qur'an and the Hadith. This discipline not only elucidates the events of the end times but also imparts insights into the nature of life, death, and the eternal hereafter.

The Afterlife

In Islam, death is not perceived as the end of existence but as a passage to a different realm. This belief highlights the continuity of the soul's journey beyond physical life.

The Qur'an often refers to the afterlife, asserting its reality and the soul's eternal existence.

Qur'an says: 'And say not of those who are killed in Allah's cause, 'they are dead.' Rather they are alive, but you are not aware. (2:154).

And: 'Those who believed and did good deeds, We shall soon admit them into Gardens beneath which rivers flow, abiding in it forever'. (4:57).

The Role of the Quran and Hadith

The Qur'an, the word of Allah as Islam's central religious text, provides fundamental teachings about the afterlife, encompassing descriptions of heaven (Jannah) and hell (Jahannam), the

resurrection, and the Day of Judgment (Yawm al-Qiyamah).

The Hadith, encompassing the sayings and actions of Prophet Muhammad (صلى الله عليه وآله وسلم), add to the Qur'anic teachings, offering detailed accounts of the signs of the Hour, the resurrection, and the events of the Day of Judgment.

Accountability and Moral Responsibility

A central theme in Islamic eschatology is the concept of individual accountability and divine judgment. Every person is responsible for their actions and will be judged accordingly.

Qur'an says: 'Round each man's neck We have hung his account of deeds, and We shall bring out for him a scroll, which he will see spread open. (We will say) 'Read your book! Today you suffice as your own reckoner.' (17:13-14).

The belief in a Day of Reckoning, where deeds will be evaluated, inspires Muslims to lead lives of righteousness, integrity, and devotion.

Intercession (Shafa'ah)

Intercession is an important concept in Islamic eschatology, where it is believed that certain dignitaries, including prophets and martyrs, will intercede with Allah on behalf of sinners.

Qur'an says: On that Day, intercession is not of any avail except his, to whom the Most Compassionate gives permission and with whose words He is well pleased. (20:109).

This intercession, however, is not a guarantee of salvation but rather a mercy from Allah, reinforcing the concept of divine justice and grace.

Jannah and Jahannam in the Afterlife

The Islamic vision of the afterlife presents a vivid and detailed picture of both paradise (Jannah) and hellfire (Jahannam), each serving as a final abode for souls based on their earthly deeds and Allah's ultimate judgment.

Jannah (Heaven)

Definition and Significance: Jannah, often translated as 'paradise' or 'garden', is depicted in Islam as a place of eternal bliss and reward. It is the ultimate destination for the righteous and those who have lived in accordance with Allah's commandments.

Qur'an says: Allah has promised the believers, both men and women, Gardens through which rivers flow, therein to abide (for ever), and blessed dwellings in Gardens of perpetual bliss; and greater (than those) is Allah is pleased with them. That indeed is the supreme reward. (9:72).

Description: Jannah is described in the Qur'an and Hadith as a place of unimaginable beauty, with gardens beneath which rivers flow, abundant and everlasting provisions, and a state of complete contentment and joy.

Qur'an says: Here is the parable of the paradise which the righteous have been promised: it has rivers, the water of which will never be stagnant, rivers of milk whose taste never changes, rivers of wine (of Allah's compassion) delicious to those who drink, and rivers of honey pure and clear. In it they will have all kinds of fruits, as well as forgiveness from their Lord. (47:15).

Levels and Inhabitants: There are various levels in Jannah, with the highest levels reserved for the prophets, martyrs, and the most pious. The dwellers of Jannah will experience a close and direct relationship with Allah, marked by peace and divine pleasure.

Jahannam (Hell)

Definition and Significance: Jahannam, or 'hell', is portrayed as a place of punishment for those who have denied Allah's guidance and led lives of sin and transgression. It represents the consequences of straying from the path of righteousness.

Qur'an says: O' you who believe, save yourselves and your families from the Fire whose fuel is men and rocks, over which are appointed angels stern and severe as wardens who never disobey what Allah commands them, and do what they are commanded (66:6).

Description: The Qur'an and Hadith describe Jahannam as a place of extreme suffering, with intense heat, scalding fluids, and various forms of torment tailored to the sins of its inhabitants.

Qur'an says: As for the disbelievers, garments of Fire will be cut out for them and boiling water will be poured over their heads, Which will melt the contents of their bellies as well as their skin. (22:19-22).

Levels and Inhabitants: Similar to Jannah, Jahannam has multiple levels, with the severity of punishment increasing with each level. It is destined for hypocrites, disbelievers, and sinners who have not sought forgiveness or have rejected the mercy of Allah.

The Day of Judgment (Yawm al-Qiyamah)

In Islamic belief, the Day of Judgment, is a pivotal event that marks the culmination of earthly life and the beginning of the hereafter. It is a day when all people will stand before Allah to be judged for their deeds.

The Importance and Inevitability

Central to Faith: Belief in the Day of Judgment is a fundamental tenet of Islamic faith, considered one of the six articles of faith. It underscores the ultimate accountability of everyone.

Qur'an says: Everyone will taste the death. You (O believers) will get your recompense in full on the Day of Resurrection; and he who is spared the Fire and finds his way to Paradise will meet his desire. And what is the life of this world except enjoyment of delusion. (3:185).

Inevitability: The Qur'an emphatically states the certainty of this day, a time when the entire universe will be transformed, marking the end of temporal existence and the commencement of the eternal hereafter.

Qur'an says: The day the earth is transformed into another earth and the heavens (as well), and everyone will appear before Allah, the One, the All Supreme. (14:48).

The Events of the Day

Resurrection: The day begins with the resurrection of all people, where every individual who has ever lived will be brought back to life.

Qur'an says: Does the human being think that We will not reassemble his bones? Yes indeed. We can reshape even his fingertips. (75:3-4).

Judgment: Each person's deeds, both good and bad, will be presented, and they will be judged by Allah's perfect justice. The deeds will determine the individual's final abode, be it Jannah or Jahannam.

Qur'an says: Whoever has done good, equal to the weight of an atom, shall see it there, And whoever has done evil, equal to the weight of an atom, shall (also) see it there. (99:7-8).

The Scales of Justice: The concept of Mizan (scales) is a crucial element of this day, where deeds will be weighed to determine the fate of each person.

Qur'an says: We will set up balances of absolute justice on the Day of Resurrection, and no person will be wronged in the least. Even though it be a deed so much as the weight of a grain of mustard seed, We will bring it forth to be weighed. (21:47).

The Role of Prophets and Intercession

Prophetic Intercession: Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) will have a unique role on this day, including the special intercession (Shafa'a) for his Ummah (nation). There are many Ahadith in this context in Authentic books of Ahadith.

Witnesses: Prophets and messengers will also serve as witnesses for or against communities to whom they were sent.

Qur'an says: So how will it be when We bring a witness from all nations, and We bring you (O' Prophet ﷺ) as a witness and a watcher over them? (4:41).

The Significance for Believers

Moral and Spiritual Implications: The belief in Yawm al-Qiyamah has profound moral and spiritual implications for Muslims, instilling a

sense of responsibility and awareness of the transitory nature of worldly life.

Guidance for Life: This belief guides Muslims to strive for righteousness, constantly mindful of the ultimate return to Allah and the eternal consequences of their actions.

Signs of the Day of Judgment (Ashrat al-Sa'ah)

In Islamic eschatology, the approach of the Day of Judgment (Yawm al-Qiyamah) is preceded by various signs, known as Ashrat al-Sa'a. These signs, as mentioned in the Qur'an and expounded upon in the Hadith. These are divided into two categories: minor signs (Ashrat al-Sa'ah al-Sughra) and major signs (Ashrat al-Sa'ah al-Kubra).

Minor Signs (Ashrat al-Sa'ah al-Sughra)

Prelude to Major Signs: The minor signs are numerous and are seen as preludes to the major signs. They include moral decay, widespread injustice, and the proliferation of false prophets.

Social and Moral Changes: Among these signs are the loss of trustworthiness, the rise of materialism, and the degradation of family ties, indicating a shift in societal values and ethics.

Major Signs (Ashrat al-Sa'ah al-Kubra)

The Final Events: The major signs herald the imminent arrival of the Day of Judgment. They are fewer in number but significant in impact, including the appearance of the Imam Mahdi, the descent of Isa (Jesus) (عليه السلام), the emergence of the Dajjal (Antichrist), and the rising of the sun from the west.

Culmination of History: These signs represent the culmination of human history and a profound transformation of the world, leading directly to the Day of Judgment.

The Role of Believers

Awareness and Preparedness: For Muslims, knowledge of these signs is not meant to evoke fear but to prepare spiritually and morally for the

end times. It is a call to adhere steadfastly to Islamic teachings and values.

Avoiding Speculation: While these signs are a topic of study and reflection, Islam cautions against undue speculation or attempting to predict the exact timing of these events, emphasizing that the knowledge of the Hour is with Allah alone.

Qur'an says: Indeed, Allah (alone) has the knowledge of the Hour. (31:34).

Theological and Spiritual Significance

Reminder of the Transient Nature of the World: The signs of the Day of Judgment serve as reminders of the transient nature of the world and the reality of the hereafter.

Moral Compass: They provide a moral compass for Muslims, encouraging them to strive for righteousness and piety in anticipation of standing before Allah (صلى الله عليه وآله وسلم).

Comparative Coherence of Islamic Eschatology with Christian and Judaic Traditions

Islamic eschatology, when compared with the eschatological views of Christianity and Judaism, demonstrates unique coherence and consistency, particularly in its theological underpinnings and practical implications.

Theological Consistency

Unified Source: In Islam, the descriptions and teachings regarding the end times are drawn primarily from the Qur'an and supplemented by Hadith, providing a consistent and unified theological narrative. This contrasts with the Christian eschatological sources, which span across various books of the Old and New Testaments, sometimes leading to diverse interpretations.

Clarity and Detail: Islamic eschatology offers clarity and detail, particularly regarding the afterlife, the signs of the Hour, and the Day of Judgment. This is in contrast to Judaic eschatology, which can be more ambiguous and

less detailed about the afterlife and the Messianic age.

Coherence in the Narrative

Integration with Monotheism: Islamic eschatology is deeply integrated with its core monotheistic belief, emphasizing the oneness of Allah (ﷻ) and His ultimate justice. In contrast, Christian eschatology involves complex doctrines like the Trinity, which can be seen as less coherent from a strictly monotheistic perspective.

Prophetic Continuity: Islam positions its eschatological narrative within a continuum of prophetic revelations, acknowledging the prophets of Judaism and Christianity while presenting Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) as the final messenger. This continuity adds coherence to the Islamic view, as it builds upon and completes the narratives found in Judeo-Christian traditions.

Practical Implications for Believers

Moral and Ethical Guidance: Islamic eschatology offers clear moral and ethical guidance for believers, with its vivid depiction of the afterlife serving as a constant reminder of the transient nature of worldly life. This practical aspect can sometimes be less emphasized in Judaic eschatology, which often focuses more on the collective destiny of the people of Israel.

Personal Accountability: The emphasis on personal accountability and the balance of divine justice and mercy in Islamic eschatology offers a coherent framework for individual conduct, contrasting with some Christian eschatological beliefs that can be perceived as predestined or grace-centric.

Compatibility with Modern Understanding

Resonance with Contemporary Issues: Islamic eschatology, with its emphasis on justice, ethical living, and the accountability of all humans, resonates strongly with contemporary issues of moral and social responsibility.

The Unique Features of Islamic Eschatology

Islamic eschatology, with its detailed portrayal of the end times, holds distinct characteristics that set it apart from the eschatological views of other faith traditions, particularly those in Judeo-Christian beliefs.

Comprehensive and Detailed Descriptions

Vivid Imagery: Islamic eschatology is marked by its vivid and detailed descriptions of the events leading up to and including the Day of Judgment, the afterlife realms of Jannah and Jahannam, and the various stages of the soul after death.

Integration with Daily Life: These descriptions are not merely theoretical; they are deeply integrated into the daily spiritual life of Muslims, influencing their worldview and ethical conduct.

Emphasis on Moral Accountability and Divine Justice

Personal Accountability: A central theme in Islamic eschatology is the emphasis on personal accountability. Each individual's deeds will be scrutinized, and justice will be administered by Allah with perfect fairness.

Divine Mercy and Forgiveness: Alongside justice, there is a strong emphasis on the mercy and forgiveness of Allah, encouraging believers to seek repentance and to lead morally upright lives.

The Signs of the Hour

Specific Prophecies: Unlike some other religious traditions, Islamic eschatology includes specific prophecies regarding the minor and major signs of the Day of Judgment. These prophecies play a significant role in the collective consciousness of the Muslim community.

A Call to Ethical Living: The signs serve as reminders of the impermanence of the world and encourage ethical living and spiritual vigilance among believers.

Role of the Prophets and Intercession

Prophetic Narratives: The roles of various prophets, especially Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) and Prophet Isa (Jesus) (ﷺ), in

the events of the end times are distinctly outlined in Islamic teachings.

Intercession (Shafa'ah): The concept of intercession by the Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) and other righteous individuals highlights divine justice and mercy.

Islamic eschatology, with its unique features, not only provides a comprehensive understanding of the end times but also offers practical guidance for living a life in accordance with Islamic principles. It reinforces the transient nature of this world and the reality of the hereafter, where the ultimate fate of each soul will be determined.

Conclusion

Islamic eschatology stands out for its coherence, sensibility, and practicality. Rooted in the unyielding monotheistic foundation of Islam, it presents an end-time narrative that is not only theologically consistent but also deeply intertwined with the everyday life of a believer.

The sensibility of Islamic eschatology lies in its clear depiction of the afterlife, its emphasis on moral and ethical accountability, and its integration with the daily spiritual consciousness of Muslims. Islamic eschatology provides a straightforward and comprehensive view of what awaits humanity beyond this temporal existence.

Furthermore, the coherence of Islamic eschatology is enhanced by its continuity with previous Abrahamic traditions, acknowledging their prophets and teachings while presenting a completed and perfected narrative with the finality of Prophet Muhammad's (ﷺ) message. This continuity reinforces the sensibility of Islamic teachings, offering a unified perspective on the history and future of humanity's spiritual journey.

It stands as a testament to the comprehensive and holistic nature of Islamic teachings, which encompass not only beliefs about the unseen but also practical guidance for leading a virtuous and purposeful life.

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About the Author



Ash Shaikh Mir Asedullah Quadri is well known all over the world for his explanation of Islamic Tawheed, Sahih Iman, Sahih Islam and Sahih Ihsan. He is a scholar, historian, and poet. He is the author of Tafseer-e-Asedi, Irshad Al Asedi, Fusus Al-Iman and over 1000 books on various Islamic subjects. He has written many research articles on religion, history, and other subjects. He is also the Editor in Chief of CIFIA Global Journal.